

## **Cuban spy tales diverge in Miami federal court**

**By Vanessa Bauzá**

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Did the Cuban spy suspects run a sophisticated espionage ring, passing military secrets to their bosses in Havana? Or were they low-level operatives cooperating with the FBI in an attempt to prevent terrorism on their island?

During their opening statements in a Miami federal court on Wednesday, prosecutors and defense attorneys painted a radically different picture of the five men on trial.

Assistant U.S. Attorney David Buckner told jurors about the men's false identities -- names borrowed from deceased babies in California. He told them about high frequency radio transmissions, hurried exchanges of encrypted computer disks in a Wendy's bathroom and "escape documents," fake passports designed to get them out of South Florida in a jam.

"All these things paint a portrait of a sophisticated and highly motivated espionage cell operating in our community," Buckner said.

Defense attorney Paul McKenna did not dispute that his client, Gerardo Hernández, and the other men were working here on orders from Havana, but he said they did not pass on any military secrets.

Their primary goal was to infiltrate exile groups, such as the Democracy Movement and the Cuban American National Foundation, and gather information to prevent terrorism in their country.

Defense attorneys argue the suspects gave information to the FBI, but their information was largely ignored.

Cuban President Fidel Castro has long charged that Miami exile groups are responsible for the hotel and restaurant bombings that rocked several tourist hot spots in 1997.

McKenna echoed a sentiment frequently heard from Cuban officials in Havana, one in which Americans are the instigators and Cuba assumes the role of victim.

"It's like a David and Goliath (situation)," McKenna said. "Cuba is the David but they don't even have a rock to throw at the giant. That's how pathetic they are."

He said the suspects, who were paid about \$500 a month for their work here, prepared reports on everything from the birth dates of naval personnel and procedures for obtaining a library card to the number of planes landing at the Boca Chica Naval Air Station—information McKenna said is available to anyone willing to spend time watching the runway from U.S. 1.

Some of their tasks included Operation Neblina (fog) to report on Roberto Martín Pérez of the Foundation and Operation Paraiso (paradise) to find out if exiles were using the Bahamas to stash weapons for a Cuban invasion.

"One thing is clear, they never intended to injure the United States," McKenna repeated. "That's very important."

All five have been charged with acting as unregistered agents of the Cuban government, which carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Three are also accused of conspiracy to commit espionage, which involves passing on military secrets. Two of the spy suspects, Antonio Guerrero and Rene González, were born in the United States. The others are Luis Medina, who was identified on Wednesday for the first time as Ramon Labañino, and Ruben Campa, identified on Wednesday as Fernando González.

In addition, Hernández, the alleged ringleader, was charged with conspiracy to commit murder in the deaths of four Brothers to the Rescue fliers who were shot down by Cuban MiGs in 1996.

Buckner, the assistant U.S. attorney, said Castro personally congratulated Hernández on the shoot down, allegedly telling him, "We have dealt the Miami right a hard blow in which your role has been decisive."

But McKenna laid the blame for the shootings squarely on the shoulders of José Basulto, founder of Brothers to the Rescue, who he said repeatedly ignored warnings from the Federal Aviation Administration and the State Department not to fly over Cuban airspace.

"José Basulto led four men to their deaths. Whenever there's a violent death there's heartache, anger and a call for someone's head. That man seated right behind me is a scapegoat," McKenna said, pointing to Hernández.

Basulto declined to comment on Wednesday because he is one of about 250 people who may be called to testify. Witnesses include exile leaders, two former double agents, a high-ranking Cuban army officer and five of the defendants' former colleagues, who pleaded guilty to lesser charges.

Buckner told jurors perhaps the "clearest and most powerful" evidence of the defendants' intentions is contained in their detailed and voluminous reports, deciphered by the FBI.

"Their ultimate goal was to place a Cuban spy inside the Southern Command where they could gather every scrap of information regarding the military operations of the United States," Buckner said.

However, jurors will not see classified information because the spy suspects were arrested before national security was compromised.

Still, records and testimony in this case will offer a rare glimpse into Havana's intelligence circles.

"They (Cuban officials) will be following the trial closely. Other individuals or networks may have been compromised," said Juan del Aguila, a political science professor at Emory University who has written on the Cuban Armed Forces and Communist Party.

"They (agents in South Florida) probably are running for cover or they may have been compromised in one way or another."

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